



Swimming and water safety education

February 2008

RoSPA for several years now has called for improvements in the teaching of swimming and water safety, improvements in access afforded by good facilities and teachers to enable this to occur, and a step change in the ambition shown by Government in this key area. The 2002 Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) report and the findings of the 2007 Ofsted report and activity is a 'length' in the right direction.

"There is a significant difference between being able to swim 25 metres in a supervised heated indoor pool, and being able to preserve life in difficulties in cold exposed and hazardous conditions. The issue is not only the 25 metre benchmark, but one of water safety and risk assessment."

Testing the Waters, DCMS, 2002

What is water safety education?

In line with many other types of safety education, water safety is about equipping people of all ages with the right skills, knowledge and experience to make informed decisions about their own safety and protect themselves and possibly others from situations that may harm them.

Quite rightly we focus on the young. Most commonly water safety education is delivered within the curriculum as part of swimming lessons and also as part of the PHSE curriculum. Outside of this there are lifesaving clubs, sporting clubs and other organisations such as BCU lifeguards and The Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme which allow young people to take part in some level of formal water safety awareness and training.

Most importantly responsibility for water safety education sits with the family and parents explaining and showing children how to behave safely around water and enjoying being around water with them. Further to this many adults undertake formal rescue training as part of their sport, or because they have to work in, on or near to water.

Why water safety education?

The latest figures show some 435 people accidentally drown in the UK including an average of between 40 to 50 children. In to this increasing numbers of children drown abroad whilst on holiday.

Within the school environment by the end of key stage two (KS2) children should be able to perform key swimming and water safety skills in a pool environment, whilst safety education is within the PHSE framework as part of the general teaching requirement for all teachers. However after KS2 schools are no longer obliged to provide swimming within the curriculum (although many do).

Unfortunately many people who do drown can swim; often the victim is overcome by the conditions (i.e. cold / fast flowing) or is injured when they enter the water. So simply being 'able to swim' is not enough on its own. Being able to recognise the risks and make an informed choice is critical to staying safe around water. Having the ability to identify where it is safe to swim or boat, or being aware of the possible consequences of being around water is the first step to ensuring that the visit is memorable for all the right reasons.

What are the current issues?

It is debatable whether the current standards for swimming at KS2 are adequate. The fact that swimming and water safety are not compulsory beyond this age, even when we know that teenagers are a key at risk group for accidental injury and drowning, also raises questions.

In particular at key stage two, children should be able to demonstrate the following:

- Pace themselves in floating and swimming challenges related to speed, distance and personal survival;
- Swim unaided for a sustained period of time over a distance of at least 25 metres;
- Use recognised arm and leg actions, lying on their front and back;
- Use a range of recognised strokes and personal survival skills.

In the 2002 DCMS [report](#), the Government agreed with the assertion that the definition of being "*able to swim*" needed reconsideration, and considered that "*teaching children to swim, but only just, may in fact create a hazardous false confidence*".

Taken another way, our lack of ambition and commitment to give young people the right swimming and water safety skills *maybe* worsening a problem it was intended to limit.

Irrespective of the debate surrounding the current targets and ambition, many children, particularly those in deprived areas, are not reaching the targets that are currently set. In the 2007 [report](#) by Ofsted five of the 30 schools surveyed (16%) had inadequate standard attained by pupils. However in separate [press reports](#) up to 50% of pupils had not reached the required standard in some local authorities.

The Ofsted report also highlighted concerns about children who came into the swimming lessons with lower skill levels, pupils with social or behavioural difficulties and children from some black minority ethnic groups not being supported adequately to meet the required standard.

Encouragingly the Ofsted report recommended that all schools should have a target for attainment of the statutory KS2 standard and monitor progress towards it. In addition the Government has invested some £5.5 million across the country to provide 'top up' [swimming schemes](#) to rectify some of these issues.

Many of the issues that cause the drowning problem are structural, including deprivation and cultural norms, and are part of the wider issues we face in enabling greater and more quality access to education and leisure facilities for swimming and water safety lessons.

What do we want to see?

- A clearer and more robust definition of “able to swim”;
- A joined up approach towards the management of water safety;
- A framework and standard of teaching that eventually is comparable in terms of its demands and resources to the model seen in Australia and New Zealand where more emphasis is placed on the skill level and knowledge gained as well as the attainment achieved.
- A continuing commitment to water safety education, throughout the curriculum and especially into secondary education.

What is RoSPA doing about this?

Reducing the number of people who drown is a key issue. To this end we are members of the Swimming Advisory Group and have been a lead member in developing the National Water Safety Forum to better meet the particular demands of water safety.

We have supported the major swim teaching bodies in their own campaigns and drive to improve swimming and water safety standards and participation. We have also produced free material for professionals and parents who are concerned or simply want more information about the risks.

We have funded and carried out research into the extent and nature of the drowning problem and we work with local authorities to help them manage the risks faced in managing their open water spaces.

About RoSPA

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents is a registered charity established more than 90 years ago that aims to campaign for change, influence opinion, contribute to debate, educate and inform - for the good of all. By providing information, advice, resources and training, RoSPA is actively involved in the promotion of safety and the prevention of accidents in all areas of life - at work, in the home, on the roads, in schools, at leisure and on (or near) water.

RoSPA's mission is to save lives and reduce injuries.

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